

## The College at Brockport: State University of New York Digital Commons @Brockport

---

English Master's Theses

English

---

1972

# Nihilism in Melville's Moby Dick

John E. Barnum

*The College at Brockport*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng\\_theses](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng_theses)



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Barnum, John E., "Nihilism in Melville's Moby Dick" (1972). *English Master's Theses*. 100.  
[http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng\\_theses/100](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng_theses/100)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).

NIHILISM IN MELVILLE'S MOBY DICK

by

John E. Barnum

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School of the State  
University of New York, College at Brockport,  
in partial fulfillment for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

1972

NIHILISM IN MELVILLE'S MOBY DICK

BY John E. Barnum

APPROVED:

Stephen B. Dine  
Thesis Advisor

8/27/73  
(date)

[Signature]  
Thesis Reader

9/5/73

W. Weis  
Thesis Reader

8/28/73

T. F. O'Donnell  
Chairman, Graduate Committee

9/26/73

[Signature]  
Chairman, Department of English

9/26/73

[Signature]  
Dean of Graduate Studies

9/28/73

## PREFACE

One of many possible interpretations of Herman Melville's masterpiece novel, Moby Dick, for which there is much textual and critical evidence, is that it is a fictional statement of the author's basically nihilistic view of man and his world. Melville's nihilism, it will be shown, derives primarily from his belief that man's perception of himself and the world is relativistic; that is, the phenomena he apprehends are inevitably colored and shaped by his own mental and emotional faculties to such an extent that his supposedly objective observations are, in fact, nothing less than reflections of his own personality or psyche. A "healthy" nihilism, as exhibited in the novel by Ishmael, teaches one to mistrust both his perceptions and ideas, so that he will refrain from acting upon them when that action might do harm to others or to himself. Where Emerson says, "Trust Thyself", Melville says, "Distrust Thyself most of all." The dire consequences of not following the latter dictum are revealed in the character of Ahab and the fate which he suffers.

The term nihilism is derived from the Latin nihil, meaning literally nothing or, secondarily, a thing of no value. The word "nihilist" originated in the Middle Ages as a religious appellation for a person who doubted the divinity of Christ and other articles of the Christian faith. It was subsequently used in Russia, in 1829, generally as a pejorative for a worthless person or know-nothing. In 1862 Ivan Turgenev pinned the label "nihilist" on the younger generation through his famous novel Fathers and Sons. The term "nihilism", also used by Turgenev, applies in the novel to the philosophy of the protagonist Bazarov, which consists wholly of rebellion against the status quo. It thus came to be popularly used as a loose description of one who practiced rebellion for rebellion's sake -- an anarchist.

The definition that most concerns us here, however, is that of philosophical nihilism:

"... the belief that nothing is, and hence no knowledge is, possible; or that truth in knowledge and obligation in morality have no objective reality. ...It is generally used nowadays by realists to mark their opinion of the idealistic doctrine of the external world, or, in a similar controversial way, to denote the tendency of doctrines of philosophical skepticism..." 1

A loose, cultural definition states that nihilism is:

"a doctrine advocating intellectual negation and the sheer destruction of whatever may in fact exist, be it material or spiritual.

Such a theory would hold that it is of no interest whether or not anything replaces that which is to be annihilated. 2

"Nihilism is essentially a value judgment, not a systematic program or organized school of thought. "Nihilism" is dialectical, oppositional, countering --- not an attitude in itself." Or, if construed as an attitude, it is fundamentally a negative one. "Nihilism literally has only one truth to declare, namely the truth that ultimately nothingness prevails and the world is meaningless." 3 4

Melville wrote during an age in which all previously accepted knowledge and religious beliefs were being questioned, disproved and refuted as untrue or injurious to man's nature. Long held beliefs in the classical order and domestic familiarity of the universe were shaken to their foundations by the iconoclastic minds of Nietzsche, Freud, Darwin, Marx, and others, and eventually doomed to extinction with the birth of the Modern Age. The Modern Mind surveyed an alien cosmos, destitute of comforting traditional values and seemingly hostile or indifferent to the existence of man. An ever-growing tide of nihilistic despair engulfed writers and thinkers everywhere as they confronted the yawning abyss of meaninglessness.

While Melville was not a philosopher in the academic sense, he was America's most philosophical novelist. As one of the early victims of the modern malaise, Melville encountered many of its principal concerns --- spiritual disillusionment,

intellectual alienation and the search for new meanings and values to replace the old, shattered beliefs. His response was in no way clear-cut or conclusive, but throughout his writings a strong tendency towards nihilism became evident as his career progressed. There seemed to him to be no absolute, inherent or God-given meaning in the world. Whatever seems meaningful or purposive to man has been created by man himself. In other words, all meaning is relative --- relative to man as an individual and/or as part of a group. Such relativism or solipsism, carried to the ultimate resolve, is nothing more or less than nihilism. He offers no constructive alternative, certainly, in the philosophical sense. All that can be said, finally, is that man must learn to live in recognition of the void, the flux of being, for "... in landlessness alone resides the highest truth..."

In Moby Dick Melville begins in a similar reflective mood, describing the "crowds of water gazers" lining the waterfront of a New England whaling town:

"Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. ... What do you see? ... Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. ... But these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster --- tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here? But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land; ..."

He comments, "meditation and water are wedded forever." Then, by way of explanation, he relates the Greek myth of Narcissus:

... Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. 6

This passage, indeed, is the key to the central meaning of Moby Dick and to the mysteries of the universe itself, insofar as any universal statement can be said to summarize the novel.

Narcissus confuses the self and non-self in falling in love with his own image; he is caught between consciousness and external reality and cannot distinguish the difference. This is a fatal mistake, one which Ahab makes with similar consequences, in pursuit of what is really the same "ungraspable phantom."

This error of self-projection is universally shared by all men, as Melville indicates: "... that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans." Every man, to varying degrees, projects his own image onto the external world, and then mistakenly believes he sees a "reality" which is objective and independent of his own consciousness. It is a vision distorted by the subjective lens of the mind; both more and less than meets the eye is "there". The fascination water holds for all men thus lies in its dis-



torting properties and shifting nature as compared to the more firm and fixed aspects of the landscape, which are more resistant to the inventive, shaping propensities of the human mind. Bodies of water, because of their hidden depths, encourage endless speculation; their vastness unleashes the imagination and lends itself to soaring flights of fancy. And, most importantly, the reflective qualities of water, as if denying any substance of its own, give man back his own image when he gazes upon it. That all men do not suffer death like Narcissus and Ahab is only a matter of degree --- to most the question of an ultimate reality does not even occur, let alone become an all-consuming obsession.

Throughout Moby Dick thematic emphasis is placed on the process of perception. That is to say, the focus is not on phenomena in themselves, but on the mental processes of perception and conceptualization that characterize the active human mind. Indeed, external phenomena do not seem to possess an existence independent of the mind's perception of them: "... the antagonism between the eagerly grasping mind and elusive reality is fundamental to all other antagonisms in the book."<sup>7</sup> We see this process most clearly in the workings of Ishmael's mind, but it is present in Ahab and the lesser characters as well. The novel, as we shall see, is actually one extended attempt to come to grips with an indeterminate reality.

The point of view Melville most strongly develops is a

relativistic one. With this view in mind, Ishmael once states flatly: "Nothing exists in itself."<sup>8</sup> And one of the most penetrating illustrations of this relativistic outlook is Ishmael's observation:

... it maketh a marvellous difference, whether thou lookest out at it from a glass window where the frost is all on the outside, or whether thou observest it from that sashless window, where the frost is on both sides, and of which the wight Death is the only glazier. ... Yes, these eyes are windows, and this body of mine is the house. What a pity they didn't stop up the chinks and the cannies though, and thrust in a little lint here and there. But it's too late to make any improvements now. The universe is finished..."<sup>9</sup>

Not only are man's perceptions colored by internal conditions and exterior circumstances, but his senses also can be easily deceived. Describing the drinking glasses used in the "Spouter Inn" Ishmael notes: "Though true cylinders without --- within the villanous green goggling glasses deceitfully tapered downwards to a cheating bottom."<sup>10</sup>

The chapter entitled "The Doubloon" forms the most succinct statement of the author's relativism. Each of the main characters, with the exception of Ishmael, approaches the gold doubloon Ahab has nailed to the mast as a reward to the first man that sights Moby Dick, and each one interprets its markings in a different way, according to his own individual character and approach to life. Ahab interprets the

three peaks pictured on the coin as symbols of pride, reflecting his own egotism. Starbuck gives a Christian rendering of the symbols. Stubb, the happy-go-lucky, carefree second mate, offers a typically flippant version, and Flask, the materialistic third mate, sees only sixteen dollars to buy cigars in the coin. Pip, the cabin boy, possessed by a divine madness that is similar to the wisdom of Lear's Fool, comes up to the coin and ~~says~~ simply: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look."<sup>11</sup> That is all that can be said with certainty; none of the interpretations is more "correct" in the conventional sense of the word than any other. "The object is indiffer~~e~~nt, the subject is all that is needed because the subject always sees hims~~e~~lf."<sup>12</sup> Pip terms the doubloon "the ship's navel" and, in effect, all the men have been doing in looking at the doubloon is contemplating their own navels. Ahab hims~~e~~lf has a momentary insight into the essentially solipsistic nature of experience as he contemplates the coin:

... this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. Great pains, small gains for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself. 13

Later on in the novel, Ahab refers to the human eye itself as the "magic glass", and so it is. This tricky, slippery glass is not by any means to be confused with Emerson's "transparent eyeball" by which the beholder perceives truth

in all directions. On the contrary, the overwhelming relativism of Moby Dick is a stark denial of optimistic dualism, idealism and other such systems.

Religion fares no better under Melville's magic glass. As a teacher of belief in absolute truths, religion is, to Melville, a false way to view life and a mode of mental enslavement. As such, it is one of the principal targets for his bitter invective and ridicule. Melville's attitude toward Christianity and the Church may be summed up in a few lines:

... all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore? But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God --- so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! 14

Christianity, to Melville, preaches submission and passive acceptance of dogma at the cost of an open, inquiring mind. Symbolically portrayed, the sea epitomizes limitlessness and unbounded freedom of mind and spirit in contrast to the land, which in the Melvillean scheme of things is synonymous with deadening inertia and enslavement to regressive creature comforts and security. Christianity comes to be identified in the author's mind with "landlocked" values through its stress upon unquestioning faith, acceptance of "God's will be done",

and even resignation to human suffering and one's lot in life to secure the promise of salvation.

As one critic sees it, in Moby Dick Melville's "... ultimate goal was to tell a story which would illuminate, obliquely, his personal declaration of independence not only from the tyranny of Christian dogma but also from the sovereign tyranny of God Almighty." <sup>15</sup> His many biblical references throughout the book, although conventional enough on the surface, are charged with a sustained irony that supports no less than a profoundly heretical, at times even blatantly blasphemous, attack upon God, the Church, its doctrines, and the Bible as a source of truth or value. In one such particularly pointed, although at the same time indirect, attack upon Christian belief, the narrator, Ishmael, questions the validity of life after death:

"... how it is that we still refuse to be comforted for those who we nevertheless maintain are dwelling in unspeakable bliss; why all the living so ~~shut out~~ hush all the dead; wherefore but the rumor of a knocking in a tomb will terrify a whole city. All these things are not without their meanings. But Faith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope." <sup>16</sup>

And in ironic contrast to Christians he has known, Ishmael praises the savage Queequeg as noble, honest, kind and sincere in his pagan beliefs. "I'll try a pagan friend, thought I, since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy." <sup>17</sup> Queequeg's regal bearing and proud independence is singled

out, significantly, as one of his noteworthy qualities.

Choosing, appropriately enough, the story of the God defier, blasphemous Job, as a vehicle, Melville boldly proceeds to put into the words of Father Mapple's sermon (in words that would seem more appropriate coming from the mouth of Ahab) his own chief rebuttal to God's command of obedience:

Woe to him who would not be true, even  
though to be false were salvation ...  
Delight is to him ... who against the  
proud gods and commodores of this earth,  
ever stands forth his own inexorable  
self ... Delight is to him who gives no  
quarter in the truth ... 18

The story line, if interpreted in an orthodox Christian fashion, bears a rough resemblance to the biblical tale of Jonah in that it may be read allegorically as a moralistic story of a man who chooses not to follow the teachings of Christ and is punished in the end by a whale that could be thought of as an embodiment or instrument of God. But such a simplistic interpretation must ignore abundant evidence to the contrary of Melville's irreverent, satirical attitude toward Christianity. For instance, the chapter called "Jonah Historically Regarded" openly ridicules the physical details of the biblical narrative as impossibly unrealistic.

However much Melville attacks fundamental Christian beliefs, one must not lose sight of the fact that he does so principally because of their pernicious effects upon humanity, not because it is a simple case of atheistic disbelief or

preference for another value system on his part. And looking at the "little lower layer", to Melville, all religion, pagan and Christian alike, is essentially self-idolatry. Juxtaposed with Father Mapple's sermon is the scene which shows Queequeg carving his little wooden idol's face into a more satisfying (to him) form. Man creates God in his own image and then worships the concepts he himself has elevated to a divine status. The chapter ends with Ishmael, a nominal Christian, joining the harpooner in worshipping the pagan god the idol represents. This is but one of many scenes in which the author's preference for primitive, "heathen" religion over Christianity is implied.

If religion does not hold the answer for man, neither does any variety of philosophy. After killing both a sperm whale and a right whale, the Pequod sets sail with each whale's severed head hung from either side of the ship. Melville's muses:

As before, the Pequod steeply leaned over towards the sperm whale's head, now, by the counterpoise of both heads, she regained her even keel; though sorely strained, you may well believe. So, when on one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds for ever keep trimming boat, Oh ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right. 19

Locke represents the empiricist school of thought, which held that sense data was the only basis of knowledge. Kant, the

antithesis of Locke's empiricism, is the acknowledged leader of the idealist school of philosophy, which championed the intellect as the guide to the highest forms of knowledge. Both are equally wrong and should be thrown overboard. Ishmael likewise warns shipowners against hiring any Romantics or Platonists, for they become so absorbed in their own brooding thoughts that they are of no practical use aboard a whaling ship. Since the Pequod, a whaler, is intended to represent a microcosmic world of all types of humanity, we must assume, then, such men are useless, their idealism futile. As an illustration, Ishmael relates the fate of a pantheist sent aloft to the masthead to sight whales:

... lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. ...But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!

20

Before discussing the major thematic thrust of the novel, it is essential to place the author's nihilism in its proper



perspective, Melville's fictional work<sup>s</sup> leading up to Moby Dick bear eloquent testimony to his progressive disillusionment with Christian ideals and Western civilization's values (materialism, social justice, the social structure itself, etc.). His ever-growing skepticism developed from a sense of outrage into agnosticism, and then finally, with the writing of his masterpiece and the following shorter work, Billy Budd, became nihilistic despair. He outlines the seemingly inevitable process of the questioning mind and sensitive soul himself: "... through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If." <sup>21</sup> The final, inescapable question is not "Why" but "If" --- If there is no meaning to man's existence how does one live? act? think? The fact that Melville asked and grappled with this most fundamentally modern question as early as 1851 (the date of Moby Dick's first publication) led Albert Camus, twentieth century French writer and existentialist, in his Myth of Sisyphus, to call Melville one of the great philosophical novelists of the "absurd".

Melville's answer to this question was, typically, a divided one, just as he personally was torn all his life by ambiguous alternatives, tormented by seeing too many sides of a question to be able to resolve his doubts with any certainty as to the rightness of any particular response to it. As he saw it, one response to the frightening possibility of an absurdly meaningless universe is to attempt to lash out in

protest at the taunting void as it is made incarnate in a singular manifestation of nature symbolic of the alien world external to man, and to prove once and for all whether it be good, evil or neutral, all-powerful and conquerable. This way of heroic defiance is represented by Ahab. The other alternative, which will be discussed later, is embodied by Ishmael.

"There are times", says Ishmael, "... in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own." <sup>22</sup> Ishmael shrugs off this line of thought as just the way things are, accepting it with amor fati. Ahab takes the joke as a personal injury and nurses it into a monomaniacal rage against the nonhuman universe. This gives some indication of the difference between the two men, the two warring sides of Melville's split psyche.

In another sense, however, Ahab represents all mankind in his outrage and rebellion against the senselessness of much of human suffering. Contemplating the severed head of one of the Pequod's harpooned whales that resembles, significantly enough, that of the "Sphinx", Ahab poses it some searching, unasked questions:

"Speak, thou vast and venerable head!, muttered Ahab, 'which, though ungarnished with a beard, yet here and there lookest hoary with mosses; speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid the world's

foundations. Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there, in that awful water-land, there was thy most familiar home. Thou hast been where bell or diver never went; has slept by many a sailor's side, where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down. Thou saw'st the locked lovers when leaping from their flaming ship; heart to heart they sank beneath the exulting wave; true to each other, when heaven seemed false to them. Thou saw'st the murdered mate when tossed by pirates from the midnight deck; for hours he fell into the deeper midnight of the insatiate maw; and his murderers still sailed on unharmed --- while swift lightnings shivered the neighboring ship that would have borne a righteous husband to outstretched, longing arms. O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!" 23

His questions go unanswered. The unresponsiveness of nature to man's inquisitive mind is a recurrent theme. The carpenter aboard the Pequod is described as generally indifferent to everything that goes on around him save his own work, and this impassivity or "stolidity" seems to characterize the "whole ~~passible~~ world" which, again like the carpenter, "while pauselessly active in uncounted modes, still eternally holds its peace, and ignores you, though you dig foundations for cathedrals." 24

Ahab, like Melville, is uncertain as to whether there is a divinity or omnipotent force or whether, if it exists, it is malevolent or simply indifferent to the destinies of men. As a result of his past experience he has already dismissed any possibility of its being good or even well mean-

ing. Taking the carpenter as a mock surrogate for God, Ahab converses with him:

'Then tell me; art thou not an arrant, all-grasping, inter-meddling, monopolizing, heathenish old scamp, to be one day making legs, and the next day coffins to clap them in, and yet again life-buoys out of those same coffins? Thou art as unprincipled as the gods, and as much of a jack-of-all-trades.'  
'But I do not mean anything, sir. I do as I do.'  
'The gods again, 'U' 25

What has caused Ahab to be so filled with bitterness, cynicism and hatred of "the gods"? When he first mounts the quarter-deck his general appearance strikes Ishmael as that of a "Man cut away from the stake", suggesting both a previous tribulation of traumatic magnitude and a nature that is heretical and estranged. His most outstanding physical characteristic is a long, livid scar which resembles the gash made in a tree that has been struck by lightning (evoking the idea of his punishment by a thunderbolt-hurling god). He stands upon an ivory leg as the result of a whale severing his own leg during an attempted harpooning. Later we discover that the whale was none other than Moby Dick himself. His posture suggests firmness, fortitude, a proud, unbowed will and a fixed purposefulness; his grim visage an inner, spiritual pain. He has a "crucifixion" in his face evincing "a mighty woe".

What began for Ahab as personal vengeance (for the loss of his leg and wounded pride) and became an obsessive hatred

of evil develops into an all-consuming cosmic defiance. He  
 "will neither accept nor ignore the brute fact of evil",<sup>27</sup>  
 and in his anger he comes to lay the burden of guilt on the  
 author of the universe himself.

Tragedy, for the Melvillean hero, is implicit in the very greatness of his powers. His breadth of imagination puts before him a more sweeping vision of the world's pain and injustice, and the generosity of his heart causes him to feel these ills as his own. Mind and will, already waked to action by the sting of his own experience, drive him on in pursuit of an answer.' 28

In a very real sense, Ahab is a tragic hero. He embodies a nobility and greatness that sets him apart from other, more ordinary men; he is possessed by a tragic flaw --- pride and wilfulness --- and he is compelled to act as he does. At times he seems a prototype of Milton's Satan, at others a Prometheus figure.

"Captain Ahab is an embodiment of that fallen angel or demi-god who in Christendom was variously named Lucifer, Devil, Adversary, Satan. ... That it was Melville's intention to beget Ahab in Satan's image can hardly be doubted. He told Hawthorne that his book had been broiled in hell-fire and secretly baptized not in the name of God but in the name of the Devil. He named his tragic hero after the Old Testament ruler who 'did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the Kings of Israel that were before him.' ... We are told that Captain Ahab is an 'ungodly, godlike' man who is spiritually outside Christendom. He is a well of blasphemy and defiance, of scorn and mockery for the gods." 29

To cite but two instances of Satanic imagery, the sacrilegious ceremony in which Ahab's crew is sworn to pursue Moby Dick resembles the Black Mass of Devil worshippers, and the fiery scene at the tryworks is vividly suggestive of a scene out of Hell:

"The hatch, removed from the top of the works, now afforded a wide hearth in front of them. Standing on this were the Tartarean shapes of the pagan harpooners, always the whaleship's stokers. With huge pronged poles they pitched hissing masses of blubber into the scalding pots, or stirred up the fires beneath, till the snaky flames darted, curling, out of the doors to catch them by the feet. ...As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like the flames from the furnace; as to and fro, in their front, the harpooners, wildly gestuculated with their huge pronged forks and dippers; as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then the rushing Requod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul." 30

Finally there are the infamous words uttered by Ahab when he "baptizes" his newly forged harpoon, intended for the White Whale, with his pagan harpooners' blood: "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" 31

Ahab may also be partly identified as a Promethean figure. Greek legend has it that Prometheus, one of the Titans who were cast out of Olympus, just as the angels of Satan were cast out of heaven in Christian myth, was chained to a mountain top by Zeus, prey for eternity to the tearing beak of a vulture as punishment for stealing the gods' fire as a gift for man. While it is true Ahab does not fit the image of the patient, passive sufferer, he does act for all men in the sense that he heroically attempts to force an answer from the cosmos to the question of why man suffers and dies unjustly or for no apparent reason.

"Ahab's madness springs from an excess of humanity. The truth upon which he has concentrated all his energies and sacrificed all that is kind to man's mortality has a profound and universal import for man. The moral and spiritual universe, all that is cherished and cherishable by men, is at stake in it." 32

But for this quest to apprehend the penultimate knowledge of whether man's existence has purpose or not, Ahab must pay the price, like Prometheus, of inner agony:

"God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates." 33

On the surface, the story revolves around a simple revenge motive; one man's hunt of a particular whale to kill

him for taking his leg off in a past harpooning incident.

On a more profound level, it may be viewed as a metaphysical quest:

... ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperation. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Æphites of the east revered in their statue devil; --- Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest has been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. 34

Starbuck, the simple, god-fearing Christian, cannot understand this and sees his captain's purpose as "blasphemous":

What Ahab sees in the white whale is not, as Starbuck mistakenly thinks, a 'dumb brute ... that simply smote him through blindest instinct,' but the whole enormous power of nature 'here concentrated to a point,' as the whale's strength is itself all gathered into his tail. But Moby Dick



is more even than this to Ahab; he is a mask and expression of the Divinity --- conceivably even God Himself. For who in this riddling world can tell agent from principal, or guess where the series ends? 35

There are several passages which hint at this implied link of whale with God. Comparing the bravery of soldiers with that of whaling men, Melville says:

"... many a veteran who has freely marched up to a battery, would quickly recoil at the apparition of the sperm whale's vast tail, fanning into eddies the air over his head. For what are the comprehensible terrors of man compared with the interlinked terrors and wonders of God!" 36

During a discussion of the whiteness of the whale the color white is said to suggest divinity as well as terror. The mad prophet Gabriel of the Jeroboam, a whaling ship the Pequod encounters during its search for the White Whale, solemnly warns that Moby Dick is none other than the "Shaker God" incarnate and it is a blasphemy to hunt him. In another instance, the author pronounces the whale to be "the most devout of all beings". And at one point, Moby Dick is termed "a Job's whale".

Ahab's rage against God, or the power responsible for creation, is most succinctly expressed in the dramatic storm scene in which the ship is threatened by lightning. Seeing the ship's rigging lit by an eerie "fire" of electrical energy generated from the lightning-charged atmosphere, Ahab boldly grasps the last link of the lightning rod chains and spits

out his defiance at the storm-tossed heavens above:

"I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gap of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. ... Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee; but at thy highest, come as mere supernal power; and though thou launchest navies of full-freighted worlds, there's that in here that still remains indifferent. Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee. ...I own thy speechless, placeless power; said I not so? Nor was it wrung from me; nor do I now drop these links. Thou canst consume; but I can then be ashes. ...Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee! ...There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical. Through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it." 37

(Note that the fire imagery is again suggestive of Prometheus' defiance of the gods.) On this level Ahab's purpose is, in effect, to slay God, the presumed author of evil and suffering in the world.

Yet, deeper still than this secondary level of interpretation, there lies a third, most profound level of meaning that teeters on the edge of the dark abyss of the incomprehensible:

"All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event ---

in the living act, the undoubted deed --- there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; ~~malice sinewing~~ malice sinewing it, with an inscrutable strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.

38

There is, significantly, one instance, at the Spouter Inn, where Ishmael sees that which lies behind the pasteboard mask. Queequeg puts the wooden idol, the image of his own god, behind the papered fireboard. "The pasteboard mask conceals nothing that man has not put there" himself.

On this third level we enter the mirror-like realm of solipsistic nihilism, where all meaning is reduced to man's own reflection, with Ahab's haunting doubt that "Sometimes I think there's naught beyond". Could the whale, then, be all surface and no substance after all?

Interpreting the novel from this point of view, it becomes evident that:

"... much of the narrative energy goes into fabricating a dialect, an idiom, a verbal mask or façade which will adequately suggest (if not render) an experience, one name of which is Nothing. ... we soon find the approach to this large mammal is beset with obstacles only to be surmounted by metaphors, paradoxes,

rhetorics, dialects --- in a word, verbal  
 legerdemain. He has so many guises and  
 disguises that the very existence of a  
 knowable substantive nature comes to seem  
 dubious. ...It is the obvious and delib-  
 erate inadequacy of the categories in the  
 "Cetology" chapter which aims to convince  
 the reader that the whale is ~~con~~clusive of  
 all categories --- as it is a whole battery  
 of phrases like "grand hooded phantom",  
 'outrageous strength with an inscrutable  
 malice sinewing it', 'unexampled intelligent  
 malignity', 'morbid hints and half-formed  
 foetal suggestions of supernatural agencies',  
 'the monomaniac incarnation of all those  
 malicious agencies which some deep men  
 feel eating in them', 'the heartless voids  
 and immensities of the universe', and 'dim  
 shuddering glimpses into Polar eternities',  
 which suggest that the whale's real quality  
 lies somewhere outside the categories of  
 common sense. Ishmael has had a vision of  
 the whale before ever he hears of him ---  
 an innate, therefore, and private whale. 40

Ishmael's personal vision of the whale is still another hint  
 that the whale is all things to all men and, therefore,  
 ultimately ambiguous.

'As a symbol the whale is endlessly suggestive  
 of meanings. It is as significant and manifold  
 as Nature herself, and, of course, that is  
 the point. Like nature the whale is paradox-  
 ically benign and malevolent, nourishing and  
 destructive. It is massive, brutal, monolithic,  
 but at the same time protean, erotically beauti-  
 ful, infinitely variable.' 41

The chapter, "The Whiteness of the Whale", is the most  
 telling example of this ambiguity. First refuting the simplis-  
 tic symbolism associating white with all that is good and pure  
 and black with evil by showing that white may signify the  
 terrible, such as death, Ishmael goes on to demonstrate its

paradoxical character, white being "all once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity" and at the same time "the intensifying agent in things most appalling to mankind."<sup>42</sup> Then, getting to the heart of the matter, although characteristically raising more questions than answers, Ishmael indicates that the implication of ultimate meaninglessness and emptiness devoid of any inherent value is that which makes the manifestation of whiteness so "appalling" to him:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows --- a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?<sup>43</sup>

White, from Melville's relativistic outlook, is a most appropriate color for the Whale in that it implies "a tabula rasa which may be imaginatively endowed with significance according to the desire or obsession of him who beholds it".<sup>44</sup> Possessing no inherent substance or significance in itself "... white thus becomes a multiple metaphoric window opening on Nothing".<sup>45</sup>

Any attempt to know the whale is inevitably futile. The entire book is a massive compendium of all the available know-

edge about him and Ishmael approaches the subject from every conceivable angle, all to no avail:

"Dissect him how I may, then, I but go s  
skin deep; I know him not, and never will.  
But if I know not even the tail of this  
whale, how understand his head?" 46

If Ishmael's quest for a true understanding of the whale if foredoomed to failure, so is Ahab's campaign for its destruction.

"According to Ahab, the Whale is a wall behind which he is a prisoner, and the only way for him to reach what he sometimes believes is the 'still reasoning thing', 'the inscrutable thing', 'within the Whale-wall is by thrusting into it. Ahab's task is, to say the least, formidable, for 'the front of the Sperm Whale's head is a dead, blind wall, without a single organ or tender prominence of any sort whatsoever', and his brain, twenty feet from his forehead, is 'hidden away behind its vast outworks, like the innermost citadel within the amplified fortifications of Quebec'. In short, Ahab must proceed from the realm of Fact and Matter to the realm of Spirit and Mind, two discrete worlds connected, according to the Melville metaphor, by a common, but impenetrable, barrier. ...His quest for knowledge of Essence is stymied, ...because his creator, unlike the Emersonians, simply did not believe that Nature is the conduit to the Oversoul and that knowledge of the former necessarily he holds knowledge of the latter." 47

"The dead, blind wall butts all inquiring heads at last." 48

Ironically enough, the one person who has the "truth" revealed to him is the cowardly cabin boy, Pip, the most insignificant member of the crew. Falling overboard from a

whaling boat, he is left alone and deserted in the vastness of the ocean. Melville describes the experience as an "intolerable lonesomeness" because of "the intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity." By chance he is later rescued, but termed insane by his shipmates from that moment on;

"The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-mercies, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God." 49

The key phrase is "indifferent as his God". Pip sees that God, if there is one, is utterly indifferent to man's existence. The world is indeed, a "heartless immensity" and Pip's frail ego structure cannot withstand the shock of such a revelation. To man, the thought that his life, all life, has no value is "insanity", but it is the bedrock of reality, "heaven's sense", just the same. It is unintelligible to "all mortal reason"; man cannot apprehend it by the use of logic; that "celestial thought which to reason is absurd and frantic" must be lived to be real-

ized. That experience produces an alienation from other men and all that was previously known and familiar in that it is seen in a new, cold light --- a wisdom born of anguish that is madness in the eyes of the world.

Ahab identifies with the plight of Pip, pitying him with the last spark of humane feeling still burning in his hate-hardened heart and revealing at the same time the fundamental cause of his "quarrel with God":

"Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here.  
Ye did beget this luckless child, and  
have abandoned him, ye creative libertines.  
...Lo, ye believers in gods all goodness,  
and in man all ill, lo you! see the  
omniscient gods oblivious of suffering  
man."  
50

Perhaps the problem of evil in the world is sufficient cause for moral outrage and protests, but Ahab's monomaniacal obsession, severing all links with humanity and common human feelings, is clearly a suicidal course. For "There is a wisdom that is woe"; as Ishmael says, "but there is a woe that is madness",<sup>51</sup> Ahab's woe has so deadened the natural feelings of love and compassion that his psychological state may, indeed, be called "madness" of a kind. Even more importantly, his perception of the world has become grossly distorted by his egotism. Ahab's obsession with self renders him, ultimately, a second Narcissus. And the price of relativism, when pushed to the point of Narcissism, (solipsism) is death, both spiritual and physical. Ahab confuses or substitutes a "steady"



self-projected image for the "shifting" world about him. This refusal to accept the flux of things is also indicated by Melville in Pierre:

All meaning is of man: 'Nature is not so much her own ... interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson, according to his own peculiar mind and mood. 52

For all the brilliance of Ahab's mind, it is this precisely that he did not, could not know --- that the "ungraspable phantom of life" which has eluded and perplexed and enraged him for so long is nothing but his own reflected image. Because he is so full of demonic fury and hatred, the world naturally appears to Ahab in these terms and eventually he himself (not the White Whale) becomes the embodiment of the evil he so abhors. Just before the final chase, after having rejected Starbuck's last impassioned plea to call off the hunt and return home, Ahab gazes over the ship's rail at the water below and starts at seeing "two reflected fixed eyes in the water there." They are those of Fedallah, the devil worshipper who lurks about Ahab as closely as his own shadow, reflecting no shadow of his own. Throughout the voyage Fedallah has come to symbolize Satanic evil, the dark side of Ahab. At this critical point, his nature seems to merge with Ahab's. Ahab's soul is fully possessed, not by evil in a metaphysical sense, but by an all-too-human depravity. His quest for truth has become twisted into a pursuit of blind vengeance by the con-

suming fire of his own hatred, born of intense suffering. Ahab's smashing of the ship's quadrant, a useful instrument for accurate navigation, is an indication of the irrationality and self-delusion which has overcome his tormented soul at this point in the story. He has at last turned his back on all things human, even the man-made tools which he once so admired.

What alternative does Melville offer to Ahab's madness? Though not an optimistic outlook, the world view of Ishmael, the comparatively lighter side of Melville's psyche, represents a modus vivendi with the void. While at all times fully cognizant of the relativism of perception, Ishmael yet attempts to live a tolerable existence in the face of meaninglessness. Conventionally viewed, his way of life may be termed a moral compromise in that it entails a general belief that evil probably outweighs good in the world, but undertakes no action upon that belief. But Ishmael's is perhaps the only sane point of view we may adapt in an absurd universe. Ahab's intolerance of evil leads, as we have seen, to self-delusion and certain destruction.

The moral ambiguity of human life is only unbearable to such natures as Ahab's. From the relativistic point of view, truth is unknowable, certain knowledge unattainable; thus an obsessive preoccupation with either moral or empirical truths is foolish and dangerous.

The contrast between the two characters is marked:

Ishmael's thought consciously extends itself to get behind the world of appearances; he wants to see and to understand everything. Ahab's drive is to prove, not to discover; the world that tortures Ishmael by its horrid vacancy has tempted Ahab into thinking that he can make it over. He seeks to dominate nature, to impose and to inflict his will on the outside world ... As Ishmael is all rumination, so Ahab is all will. Both are thinkers, the difference being that Ishmael thinks as a bystander, has identified his own state with man's utter unimportance in nature. Ahab, by contrast, actively seeks the whale in order to assert man's supremacy over what swims before him as 'the monomaniacal incarnation' of a superior power. 53

Both are looking at the same reality but their interpretations differ crucially:

One may, like Ahab, look into the water or into the profound and ultimately unknowable abyss of nature, and see only one's own image or an ungraspable phantom, a white whale which is only a projection of self. Or, like Ishmael ... one may see one's image but in a context of life and reality which is not one's self. To be Ahab is to be unable to resist the hypnotic attraction of the self with its impulse to envelop and control the universe. To be Ishmael is to be able at the last minute to resist the plunge from the mast-head into the sea one has with rapt fascination been gazing at, to assert at the critical moment the difference between the self and the not-self. 54

However, Ishmael is not just a character in the novel; he is its narrator, the teller of the tale, from whose mind we

receive all of our insights and impressions of the story itself.

'All that can be meditated and summed up and hinted at ... is given us by Ishmael ... And it is this emphasis on Ishmael's personal vision, in the richness and ambiguity of all events as the skeptical, fervent, experience-scarred mind of Ishmael feels and thinks them, that gives us, from the beginning, the new kind of book that Moby Dick is. ... It is a book that is at once primitive, fatalistic, and merciless, like the very oldest books, and yet peculiarly personal, like so many twentieth century novels, in its significant emphasis on the subjective individual consciousness.' 55

As an extended study of human consciousness, one of the cumulative effects of the novel is to demonstrate to us that man is not a passive observer of events, but an ever-active mentality that constantly imposes meaning(s) on everything it encounters.

'The mind's effort to sustain and know itself, that is another way of describing Moby Dick. Its similes, metaphors, symbols, allegory --- what are they but the effort of a mind to add its truth to the truth of external facts? The style follows from the same law that Melville represents now one way, now another, in the conduct of his story; --- the mind lost in its own ends informs whatever thing it contemplates.' 56

Ishmael, as a character, is a quester like Ahab.

'For he too seeks the White Whale, a phantom-correlate of that narcissistic image in the fountain, his own identity, what he calls 'the ungraspable phantom of life.' Both are equally elusive, and, in Ishmael's mind, inextricably connected.' 57

Unlike Ahab, however, Ishmael is painfully aware of the inevitable futility of the quest:

'But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, sometime or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed.' 58

Throughout the novel "problems are raised, elaborated, half-answered, but then qualified, rendered half-serious, and finally left unclear." 59

"And Ishmael, who is continually protesting that he does not know or cannot possibly express this or that, or that some quality is beyond his measure, unfathomable to his thought, uses these protests systematically as a way of suggesting precisely what he says cannot be expressed: 'How it was that they so aboundingly responded to the old man's ire --- by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs; the white whale as much their insufferable foe as his; how all this came to be, ... how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim, unsuspected way,' he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life, all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go!" 60

Thus does Melville illustrate, through Ishmael, the nature of man's experience of everyday reality in a universe in which no final, conclusive answers are to be found, if one is intellectually sincere (as Ishmael is). The only conclusion that one can reach is that no conclusions can be made. It is, of course, humanly impossible not to make judgments constantly about the world we live in, but one cannot afford to succumb to

Ahab's fatal mistake of forming lasting, irreversible conclusions about ~~the~~ ultimate character of reality. "For failure to retreat means succumbing to the phantoms; death by Moby Dick; narcissistic absorption."<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, Ishmael's existence, living in constant recognition of the awful void of universal meaninglessness, is lonely, sad, alienated.

"For the burden of his thought, the essential cause of ~~his~~ estrangement, is that he cannot come to any conclusion about anything. He feels at home with ships and sailors because for him, too, one journey ends only to begin another; and a second ended, only begins a third and so on, for ever and for aye. Such is the endlessness, yea, the intolerableness of all earthly effort."

...He suffers from doubt and uncertainty far more than he does from homelessness. Indeed, this agony of disbelief is his homelessness. For him nothing is ever finally settled and decided; he is man, or as we like to think, modern man, cut off from the certainty that was once his inner world. ...All is in doubt, all is in eternal flux, like the sea. ...But his inner world of thought is almost unbearably symbolic, for he must think, and think, and think, in order to prove to himself that there is a necessary connection between man and the world. He pictures his dilemma in everything he does on board the ship, but never so clearly as when he is shown looking at the sea, searching a meaning to existence from the inscrutable waters.

What Melville did through Ishmael, then, was to put man's distinctly modern feeling of "exile", of abandonment, directly at the center of his stage. For Ishmael there are no satisfactory conclusions to anything; no final philosophy is ever possible. All that man owns in this world, Ishmael would say, is his insatiable mind. ...Narcissus was bemused

by that image which 'we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans,' and this, says Ishmael when he is most desperate, is all that man ever finds when he searches the waters --- a reflection of himself. 62

Man's search for meaning is empty of any lasting significance, doomed from the start to failure by his consciousness intervening between the self and external reality.

Yet even if questing be futile, Ishmael must not give it up entirely. For he knows that only the sailing quest is sufficient to drive the dampness from his soul and regenerate his spirit; he must tempt himself with phantoms, for if grasping the White Whale, as Ahab does, is the fatal embrace, then only the sailing search for him is being truly alive.

Ishmael survives through compromise and through the dialectic of his vision. ... In short, both Melville and his surrogate preserve themselves because both accept a wisdom that is woe, and both reject a woe that is madness. 63

Ishmael's nihilism is qualified in large measure by a naturally buoyant disposition, a degree of philosophical detachment from events and a deep-felt reverence for nature. He seems always able to see the humor in human behavior and predicaments, including his own. In addition, he possesses a generous tolerance for his fellows and an emotional openness to new or foreign experiences, as shown for example by his acceptance of Queequeg, the savage, as a close friend. Ishmael combines an inquisitive openmindedness with a stoical resignation to fate. Life, even mere survival, appears to him to be a precious commodity and experience is savored for its own

sake. For Ishmael, "Life is to be clung to, if only precariously and for the moment, by natural piety and the ability to share with others the common vicissitudes of the human situation." 64

Without belaboring the symbolism, is it just a fortuitous accident that Ishmael, alone out of all the crew of the Pequod, is saved by Queequeg's coffin-lifebuoy and unharmed by the sharks who "glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths"?

With most men, a philosophy of nihilism would result in a passive agnosticism or, worse yet, mental paralysis. Ishmael, on the contrary, is always searching for fresh meanings or inventing new interpretations to explain his experiences to himself, if only temporarily. Thus life, for Ishmael, is ever fresh and newly discovered, its mysteries perpetually tempting, but forever unresolved.

Ishmael goes from flights of idealism to moods of despair, to lighthearted fancy, back to serious rumination and so on, never staying in one state of mind for long. He is skeptical at times, but never cynical; his idealism and feelings of camaraderie for his fellow men are never soured, no matter how dark things may appear the night before.

It is this quality of mental flexibility, of spiritual resiliency and adaptability that allows Ishmael to survive in the end. His sole principle is survival and he has become well-practiced in it. In addition, unlike the other members of the crew, Ishmael has kept his humanity intact to the very end --- he is a whole person, thus, better able to survive.

However, what is the price for survival in Ishmael's



case? His nihilism must bend in the face of evil in order to survive. This brings up the chief critical argument against a nihilistic interpretation of the novel --- namely, that nihilism would seem, from one point of view, to be an inadequate response to the problem of evil, a dilemma of which Melville was painfully aware. If one assumes the author's fundamental premise that evil and suffering outweigh the good and human happiness, one must face the problem of some kind of response to it; its existence cannot be ignored; it will not go away from merely not thinking about it. The White Whale does not swim blissfully away when it is attacked; it turns vengefully upon its pursuers and intentionally destroys the entire ship and its crew. And even if the Pequod's fate is viewed as the inevitable result of human depravity, not of some malignant omnipotence or cosmic evil, the question of the adequacy of a relativistic philosophy in the face of such awful suffering and death still remains. Nihilism offers no way of dealing with the problem of evil. Ishmael's purely mental response to situations that confront him, and his stoic acceptance of those things that sorely vex and try most other men, often leading them to utter despair of hope or justice, may be rationalized as the only intelligent reaction possible; but in refraining from taking decisive action one may, in some instances, allow evil to occur when it might have been prevented. Many critics would argue, with much validity, that a nihilistic interpretation identifies the author's position too closely with Ishmael's, and relatively ignores the fact that

there is much of Ahab, a hero of commitment and action, not detached contemplation, in Melville.

In summary then, Moby Dick may be read profitably as a nihilistic statement of Herman Melville's views on man's state of existence in an indifferent universe. His nihilism springs from an essentially relativistic point of view. That is to say, man's perception of himself and the world is shaped, to a large extent, by the intervention of his own subjective consciousness between the object and himself, rendering true empirical knowledge or objective thought impossible. Therefore, "reality" is a meaningless term to man; it does not exist for him in any absolute or universal sense. All meaning is relative to man as an individual and/or a species.

In a mythic embodiment of this central theme, man is seen to resemble Narcissus, whose own reflection is the "ungraspable phantom of life" that so tormentingly eludes his futile pursuit of a meaning to anchor his life. Ahab confuses the distinction between self and non-self to the point where he is in insane pursuit of his own self-projected image of evil, his own depravity embodied in the White Whale, which, for him, is a single, concentrated phenomenon of the universal force of evil. Like Narcissus, he drowns in his own self-delusion.

Ishmael, on the other hand, though prompted by the same human yearning to find or create a meaning for his existence, sees the relativism of human consciousness and refrains from an obsessive preoccupation with moral absolutes and universal truths, thus escaping the fate of Narcissus (drowning in one's

self-delusions about the world). To Ishmael,

Moby Dick stands for the mystery of creation which confronts and challenges the mind of man at the same time that it lies ambushed in the process of his own consciousness. He is significant of the massive inertia in things, and of the blind beauty and violence of nature --- all that ignores or twists or betrays or otherwise does outrage to man's purposes. 65

Realizing that the nature of reality is ambiguous and ultimately unknowable, Ishmael concludes that the only sane way to survive is not to form lasting conclusions about the world, to instead maintain a mental and emotional flexibility in all one's dealings with human experience.

The penalty a man pays for such a stance, however, is alienation and the perpetual anxiety of uncertainty and the inability to believe in any set of fixed values or ideas which would lend purpose to one's existence. Thus Ishmael, through Melville's prophetic vision, becomes a prototype of Modern Man.

## FOOTNOTES

1

Charles A. Moser, Antinihilism in the Russian Novel of the 1860's, (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1964), p. 28.

2

Moser, p. 18.

3

Kingsley Widmer, The Ways of Nihilism: Herman Melville's Short Novels (Los Angeles: California State Colleges, 1970), p. 134.

4

Helmut Thiebbicke, Nihilism (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 27.

5

Herman Melville, Moby Dick (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), p. 23.

6

Melville, p. 24.

7

Robert Martin Adams, Nil: Episodes in the Literary Conquest of Void During the Nineteenth Century (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 146.

8

Melville, p. 61.

9

Melville, p. 29.

10

Melville, p. 31.

11

Melville, p. 335.

12

William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy Of Mind (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1962), p. 111.

13  
Melville, p. 333.

14  
Melville, p. 99.

15  
Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Quarrel With God (Princeton:  
Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), p. 147.

16  
Melville p. 48.

17  
Melville, p. 59.

18  
Melville, p. 57.

19  
Melville, p. 259.

20  
Melville, p. 136.

21  
Melville, pp. 374-5.

22  
Melville, p. 186.

23  
Melville, pp. 247-48.

24  
Melville, p. 358.

25  
Melville, p. 398.

26  
Melville, p. 110.

27  
Merlin Bowen, The Long Encounter (Chicago: The Univ.  
Of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 137.

28  
Bowen, p. 138.

29  
Henry A. Murray, "IN Nomine Diaboli" in Melville A  
Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Richard Chase (Englewood  
Cliffs: Prentice - Hall Inc., 1962), pp. 66-67.

30  
Melville, p. 327.

31  
Melville, p. 373.

32  
Sedgwick, p. 108.

33  
Melville, p. 168.

34  
Melville, p. 145.

35  
Bowen, p. 146.

36  
Melville, p. 100.

37  
Melville, pp. 3384-85.

38  
Melville, p. 139.

39  
Martin Leonard Pops, The Melville Archetype (Kent: Kent  
State Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 72-73.

40  
Adams, pp. 141-43.

41  
Richard Chase, "Melville and Moby Dick", in Melville,  
ed. Richard Chase (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice - Hall Inc., 1962), p. 60.

42

Melville, p. 163.

43

Melville, p. 163.

44

Chase, p. 60.

45

Adams, p. 147.

46

Melville, p. 295.

47

Pops, pp. 67-68.

48

Melville, p. 393.

49

Melville, pp. 321-22/

50

Melville, p. 394.

51

Melville, pp. 328-29/

52

Bowen, p. 121.

53

Alfred Kazin, "Introduction to Moby Dick" in Melville,  
 ed. Richard Chase (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice - Hall Inc.,  
 1962), p. 43.

54

Chase, pp. 58-59.

55

Chase, pp. 40-41.

56

Sedgwick, p. 134.

57

Pops, p. 71.

58

Pops, p. 71.

59

Adams, p. 146.

60

Adams, p. 145.

61

Pops, p. 73.

62

Chase, p. 42.

63

Pops, p. 73.

64

Chase, p. 57.

65

Sedgwick, p. 98.

66



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Robert Martin. Nil: Episodes in the Literary Conquest of Void During the Nineteenth Century. London, 1966.
- Bowen, Merlin. The Long Encounter. Chicago, 1960.
- Chase, Richard. ed. Melville A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewoods Cliffs, 1962.
- Melville, Herman. Moby Dick. Boston, 1956.
- Moser, Charles A.. Antinihilism in the Russian Novel of the 1860's. The Hague, 1964.
- Pops, Martin Leonard. The Melville Archetype. Kent, 1970.
- Sedgwick, William Ellery. Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind. New York, 1962.
- Thielicke, Helmut. Nihilism. New York, 1961.
- Thompson, Lawrance. Melville's Quarrel With God. Princeton, 1952.
- Widmer, Kingsley. The Ways of Nihilism: Herman Melville's Short Novels. Los Angeles, 1970.